

## Executive Summary: Current and Future Demand for Distance Education

The President's Office of the University of Alaska asked the Institute of Social and Economic Research to help assess current and future demand for distance education. In this summary we first highlight our findings and then list questions raised and recommendations made by provosts in Anchorage, Fairbanks, and Juneau after they reviewed a draft of this report.

"Distance education" means education or training where the instructor is not in the same room with the students. It doesn't necessarily mean, as the attached maps and figures show, that all students live far from campuses (although many do). A third of distance education students in the Fall 1997 semester, for instance, lived in Anchorage, Fairbanks, and Juneau. Distance education courses are offered over television, through audio or video conferencing, by mail, over the Internet, and through combinations of those methods.

During the Fall 1997 semester, 4,115 students in 178 Alaska locations (and a few places outside Alaska) were enrolled in 293 distance education courses offered through the University of Alaska.

### **Findings of Interviews with Instructors and Rural Employers**

ISER interviewed 36 instructors who teach 53 distance education courses. They told us:

- *Distance education courses will continue to draw more and more students* because the courses are available in remote places; they are flexible and convenient; and they are available when on-campus classes are full.
- *The university should increase media advertising* for distance education courses.
- *Technical problems are common* in courses that use audio conferencing, electronic mail, and the Internet—and until they are resolved, those problems will limit growth.
- *Native organizations are a significant potential market* for expanded distance education in rural areas.
- *Lack of personal contact with students* is a shortcoming of some distance education courses, as is the lack of important support services—like libraries, advisers, and access to computers—that on-campus students enjoy.

ISER also interviewed representatives of 33 organizations that operate primarily in rural Alaska—because in many remote places, distance education courses are among the few sources of postsecondary education and training available locally. We asked rural employers whether they were satisfied with current distance education offerings and what kinds of job openings they foresaw. Because our sample is small and local education authorities make up nearly half, we need to be careful in making generalizations. Still, some findings stand out:

- *Representatives of Native organizations, utility companies, and private businesses* seem less satisfied with current distance education offerings than are local education authorities.
- *Professional development for educators* appears to be an area of sustained demand. This includes both preservice courses for students in certification programs and counseling and inservice programs for instructional aides and teachers who want to be endorsed in special or bilingual education, technology, counseling, and specific subjects.
- *Enhanced expertise in the use of computers, telecommunications, and technology* is a widespread need.
- *More counselors are needed—to deal with substance abuse and domestic violence*—as well as to work in schools.
- *Health care professionals—especially nurses and community health aides*—are in short supply, and it's possible more training could be provided locally.
- *Public administration, management, and accounting* are among the skills Native organizations most often cited when talking about how they could benefit from more local education opportunities.
- *Utilities and private businesses may need specific training and education* that distance education courses could supply, but a more systematic and detailed survey would be needed to determine those specifics.

### **Economic and Demographic Overview**

How many Alaskans there are, where they live, and how many are employed will all influence future demand for distance education. Factors that may influence demand include:

- *About 60 percent of Alaskans live within 20 road miles of one of the three main UA campuses and another 25 percent live within 20 road miles of an extended site.*
- *Rural areas tend to have a higher concentration of children and teenagers and a smaller share of young adults (20-44) than the cities. That means that in the coming years, growing numbers of potential workers will be facing limited job opportunities*
- *The distribution of jobs in rural Alaska is quite different from that in the cities, with the largest categories of jobs being retail trade, education services, the seafood and timber industries combined, and public administration.*
- *About 17 percent of the job openings in various occupations statewide between 2000 and 2005 will be in rural Alaska, according to the state Department of Labor.*
- *Education beyond high school—ranging from post secondary vocational education to professional degrees—will be required for about 30 percent of the projected job openings statewide between 2000 and 2005. The Alaska Department of Labor projects that the largest numbers of openings requiring such education will be for general managers and top executives, teachers, dental hygienists, and administrative secretaries.*

### **Provosts' Questions and Recommendations**

After reviewing a draft of this study, the University of Alaska provosts developed the following set of questions and recommendations.

#### ***Questions***

1. *Is there much competition for students taking distance education courses, and is that competition increasing?* Most UA distance education faculty interviewed for this study believe there is not much competition—a perception that is at variance with other information suggesting there is considerable competition, and that it is increasing rapidly.
2. *Why are many distance education courses not being actively marketed?*
3. *How are text-based distance education courses funded?* UA should review funding methods for these courses; some may be offered in parallel with but as overloads to classroom courses.
4. *Are distance education courses cost-effective, and how could their cost effectiveness be evaluated?* This question is raised by the large number of courses offered, and the great variety of delivery methods.

#### ***Recommendations***

1. *UA should develop a centralized management information system to track what courses are being offered by distance delivery, how they are delivered, and who is being served. There is currently no such centralized, ongoing system.*
2. *Programs and courses should be coordinated across campuses.* Effective and efficient planning requires such centralized coordination, which currently does not exist.
3. *In a rapidly expanding distance education market, UA must decide what products to create—and which to buy.* UA should also identify niches (including technological niches) where it can most effectively concentrate its distance education resources.
4. *A statewide external advisory committee or board should be established to coordinate between the existing internal advisory groups on each campus.* Such an external advisory group would annually review distance education policies statewide.